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A MESSAGE FOR TIMES OF TRANSITION¹

A STUDY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

REV. R. P. JOHNSTON, D.D.
New York City

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most interesting books of the Bible. It is a book with an outlook. It has not been permitted to gain and retain its place in the canon without serious protest. It has been ascribed to more different authors than any single book of the Bible, with the possible exception of the Book of Psalms, which is of an entirely different nature. But after all the years of discussion and investigation the author remains absolutely unknown.

Nor has it been determined just where the people lived to whom it was written. Did they dwell in Asia Minor, in Egypt, in Italy, or Babylon? The exact date is also indefinite, though it cannot have been very late, for Timothy was still living and had just been released from prison.

But here the uncertainty ceases. For no book in the Bible has a more definite purpose, and none moves more directly toward the accomplishment of that purpose. It is a specific attempt to meet specific conditions. Somewhere there was a band of Hebrew-Christians, who were on the point of abandoning Christianity and reverting to their original faith. They were discouraged, discontented, unsettled, and were contemplating a step backward in search of stability and satisfaction. The letter was written to convince them of the folly of such a step, to supply inspiration and information for a forward instead of a backward movement. Its plea is, "Cast not away your confidence." Its watchword is "forward," not "backward." Its argument is that the new is better than the old.

What the arguments for a return to Judaism were is perfectly clear from the epistle, for the eager advocate takes them up one at a time, and, disposing of them, still cries "Forward."

¹ An address delivered at the University of Chicago.

I. Let us get the historic situation. These Hebrew Christians had, under the impulse of a vision of Jesus, come out from a faith of great antiquity and of glorious traditions. The old faith boasted of a priesthood that never perished; for, though the priest might die, the priesthood lived. These Jewish Christians had seen or known of the great temple, with its elaborate ritual, its system of sacrifices, its imposing ceremonies, and its impressive appeal to the imagination. They remembered the covenant with their fathers, and all the heroic struggles and noble achievements of their race. But now they were separated from all this. They had no temple, no priests, no sacrifices, no liturgy, no imposing ritual. They were cut off from their brethren, ostracized, despised, denied a heritage in the glory of the fathers. They worshiped in some private house or some mean conventicle, or possibly in some dark catacomb. Every thing to the eye was so squalid, so barren, so meager, that the question naturally arose: "Is it wise; is it just to our children; is it the will of God? Why not go back to the faith of the fathers, and abide there *stable* and *content*?" We must not blame them; for many a body of people today, disturbed and distressed, are asking the same question with reference to the faith of yesterday.

II. Let us follow broadly the line of the writer's argument in seeking to meet this condition.

The heart of the argument lies in this, that they cannot go back to the old conditions, because new light, new truth, new visions, had come, which rendered such a step suicidal. They could only be true to the better thing as they pressed forward.

1. First he says the old covenant was a glorious thing, ministered by angels. But the new covenant is more glorious, for it was ministered by the Son. And as the Son is higher than the angels, so is the new higher than the old. Here, then, is the first argument: As to its origin, the old was good, but the new is better.

2. But, said the advocate, the new is better again in what it produces. The old covenant, ministered by angels though it was, was yet ministered by servants, for an angel is but a ministering servant. And, ministered by servants, it could only make servants. For what were Moses, Aaron, all, but servants? For a servant can only produce servants. But the new covenant was ministered by

the Son, and issues in *sons*. For it pleased God in bringing many sons to glory to make the captain of our salvation perfect through suffering. And as a son is higher than a servant, so is the new better than the old in that which it produces.

3. But, continues the eager advocate, consider the priesthood, the sacrifices, the temple. The priesthood, of which you boast in the old, was a man-made priesthood, set apart by the hands of men. It was not a part of the original plan. It was a temporary expedient, a concession to human weakness. The type of the everlasting priesthood is not Aaron or Levi, but Melchisedek. Ordained, not of men, but of God, without known ancestry or posterity. Even your own writer has said that the new priesthood shall be eternal and after the order of this mysterious King of righteousness and of peace. And consider then, he says, this great high-priest. He is ordained of God, not of man. He lives forever. Death has no more dominion over him. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; he can aid us in our trials. He is without sin, yet full of sympathy for the sinner. He makes a more excellent offering than they—even his own love to the limit of life. He offers it once for all; it needs no repetition; greater love cannot be shown. He offers it not in temples made by hands, but in the presence of the eternal Father. And in this offering, once for all, he opens up a new and living way of access unto the Father, a *way of faith*, and we may come boldly to the very throne of grace and find grace for every time of need.

4. And, continues the argument, we come into this new covenant, not by offerings of rams and bullocks, but by the dedication of our lives, our love, our wills, our imagination, by faith in the living God. In other words, our religion is no longer local, it is universal. It is no longer material, it is spiritual. It is no longer ceremonial, it is vital. It is no longer external, it is internal, a thing of faith and love and experience, spirit meeting with spirit.

5. And do you not see, he continues, that this element of faith is the eternal element in our religion? And now for the first time it is disentangled and set free from priesthods, temples, laws, ceremony, rituals. It is now the butterfly shaking itself free from the old cocoon to try its wings in the air and sunshine, and to live the larger life. And do you not see that this is the power, after all, that

wrought all that was good and great in the old dispensation? It is this witness of God in the same that sings and cheers and comforts and inspires; an outlook and upreach of the soul toward the larger things of God. Israel has been great, not because of its priesthood, its offerings, its temples; but because of its faith. It was faith that differentiated the race; faith that inspired its prophets and leaders; faith that produced its temples, its laws, its visions. And only by faith in the larger future and in the God who leads us can the largest things come to us.

You have misunderstood, he says, the very genius and ideal even of the old covenant. You have made it visible, ceremonial, material, and it was from the beginning spiritual and invisible. Read again the history of your people. It was by faith that Abel offered, Enoch walked, Noah builded, Abraham went out, Jacob wrestled, Joseph wrought, Moses led, Joshua fought, psalmists sang, prophets preached, seers taught. For faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. And faith has her radiant face to a radiant future and sings of a God who cannot fail.

Priesthood, ceremonies, offerings, temples—these were crutches and primary symbols, useful only to the weak. They were chaperons to bring us to the teacher, who should bring us to God. Now in this full noontide of faith to leave Jesus with his vision and his hope of promise, and go back to the old forms, is quitting the expanse and out-of-doors for the misty damp of the prison cell. It is striving to crowd the butterfly back into the cocoon, the eagle back into the broken shell. It is clipping the wings by which God meant us to fly, to crawl again in the dirt and the slime. It is leaving the strong meat for the food of babes. It is turning from the university back to the kindergarten.

Therefore cast not away your boldness. Be not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that press forward to the saving of the soul. Do not stand trembling upon the threshold of the new and larger era.

Launch new Mayflowers and steer boldly
Through the desperate winter sea
Nor attempt the future's portal
With the past's bloodrusted key.

Faith is of God, faith leads to God, and a larger God sits at the heart of the larger era.

III. Such was the message and appeal of this open-souled advocate at a critical period in his people's history. He clearly saw that

Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be.

He frankly recognized the fact that new revelations of truth made a return to the old conditions impossible. The only sure hope lay in recognizing the truth and adjusting life to it. It was thus a message for an age of unrest, a time of transition. Old molds of faith had been broken by the larger content of the new life. Old systems were dissolving. His purpose was to carry over into the new, all that was of worth in the old. The wine was transferred from the old skins to new, and only the skins, having served their purpose, were thrown away. New wine was already being made from the new vintage of the grapes of truth. Many of the details and interpretations of the epistle have been outgrown. The author saw through a glass darkly with reference to these. But the great central thought, the singing soul of the message, remains true today and will forever remain. And it performed its glorious service. It furnished a bridge over which a people passed from a religion of visible material symbols into a religion of spirit and reality. Something similar to this has frequently been necessary in the course of history. And it is fortunate that we can learn from those whose knowledge is partial, and can find anchorage for the time being in phases of truth that are not permanent. Thank God for men who in such times see enough of truth to prevent our being cast adrift on shoreless seas of doubt and unbelief.

When the great Reformation arose, Christian people had been taught for centuries to look to the Pope as the source of authority. Their faith was anchored to the papal throne. But one of the cardinal principles of the Reformation movement was the denial of that authority. The cable was cut, and the whole movement was set adrift. It threatened to end in shipwreck and disaster. And someone threw as an anchor this: "The Bible is the source of authority." The anchor held; the movement was steadied; and Protestantism

spread. I know not who originated the plea. I do not accept it as the ultimate truth. But for it, or some such anchor at the time, Protestantism would have lacked the absolute essential for power and extension. And who can say that this was not the only thing for which that age was prepared? The wrench from a religion of authority to one of pure spirit would have been too great for a people steeped in the idea of visible authority.

Again, in our own day a similar service was performed by a saintly soul, now gone to walk with spirits on high. The evolutionary philosophy was launched by Darwin and Wallace. It was taken up by others. It was so new, so revolutionary, and yet withal had so much that was probably true that the world was thrown into great confusion. No warning had been given, no time afforded for adjustment, and Christian people especially were greatly distressed. Preachers preached against it; newspapers attacked it; councils solemnly resolved that it was false. It was a critical time. But the man emerged who was both a Christian and a scientist. He knew Christ, and he knew science. He said they are both true, and truth cannot destroy truth. He wrote a book. It was sold by the hundreds of thousands. Few read it today. But it found for the time a standing-ground, and gave a moment's quiet, during which men recovered from the panic and began to readjust their philosophies and interpretations. And they came at length to see that, instead of evolution destroying the Bible, it really explained it and furnished the only basis for belief in it. Some day when you are looking over your library, take down the little book *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, and thank God for Henry Drummond.

IV. No two historic situations are ever exactly the same. Yet there are many elements in our present situation similar to those of the time in which the Epistle to the Hebrews was written. Every age is an age of transition. But the currents are more rapid and the tides are stronger in some than in others. We are beyond question in an age of intense, almost angry, turmoil. The evolutionary philosophy, historical criticism and research, archaeological explorations and discoveries, have utterly revolutionized our theories, changed our philosophies, compelled new view-points, and made inevitable new integrations. Possibly in no age of the world's history has the change

been so great and tumultuous as in the past twenty-five or fifty years. It has affected every sphere of thought. New sciences have been born and old sciences made over. Problems that our fathers did not dream of press sorely upon us clamoring for solution. It is an age of ferment, social, political, intellectual, ethical, and religious. As the people to whom the epistle was written had been resting upon priesthoods, temple, and ritual, so modern Christians had been resting upon an infallible church or an infallible book, upon the ultimacy of creeds, and the efficacy of ordinances. But as the advent of Christ swept away the former and left the people for the time adrift, so modern discoveries and investigations have swept away the stays of infallibility in church and book, have rendered old creeds obsolete and ceremonies ineffective. And on every hand men are saying: "What have we left? To whom or to what shall we turn?"

There are three possible attitudes in the matter. We may deny or ignore all the results of modern scholarship, and continue to protest our belief in the infallible Book and the old interpretations of it. We may rest back on the old religion and piously sing: "It was good enough for father, and it's good enough for me." "Whatever science teaches or historic investigation discloses, I am going to remain where my father stood." That is a possible attitude and some seem deliberately to have taken it. But it is an attitude neither of faith nor of wisdom. I may close my eyes and declare that the sun does not shine, but that hardly blots out the sun. I may stand where my father stood, but he did not stand where his father stood. Else progress would have been impossible. It was good enough for father because it was the best he had. So were the tallow dip, the log cabin, the lumbering stage-coach. But I do not dishonor my father by preferring the electric light, the modern home with its conveniences, and the Pullman car with its comfort and speed. I may stand there, but I palsy my intellect, prostitute my reason, mistake obstinacy for courage and egotism for faith. I may stand there, but I cannot keep my children with me, unless I refuse to send them to school and prohibit their reading modern books.

In the next place we may go to the other extreme and, moved by the world, cast all religion out of our lives. Glad to get rid of the restraint, we may vehemently deny it all. But that attitude is worse

and more foolish even than the other. Because men have had wrong theories about the earth, we do not cease to live upon it and draw from it the elements that support life. Because government has never been ideal, we do not discard all government. Because laws have never been perfect, we do not flee for refuge to anarchy. We do not refuse to light our houses and propel our conveyances by electricity, because we have not fully understood it. Because we have not attained unto perfection in medicine, we do not discard it and leave our children to die without the ministries of a physician.

It were certainly wiser to walk in the light we have than to turn back to darkness. It were wiser to see through the glass darkly and press on to the perfect vision, than to refuse to see at all. For the partial is the only way to the perfect. The noontide is the full bloom of the bud of the dawn. And in religion, as in other things, experience worketh probation and probation hope, and hope putteth not to shame, because the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which hath been given unto us.

The third possible attitude is honestly and humbly to accept the responsibility involved in being free and intelligent spirits, and bravely to assume the task, painful and discouraging though it may sometimes be, of working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, not forgetting, in the midst of doubts and misgivings and humiliating failures, that after all it is God who is working in us. It is the attitude of the learner, the believer, the worker, willing to put all things to the test, in order that he may discriminate and hold to that which is good. It is the attitude of the open mind, ready to receive truth from whatever source and to adjust life to it. It is the attitude of meekness and humility, recognizing that mysteries too deep for our sounding press upon us from every hand. It is the attitude of expectancy, looking for ever clearer light and larger revelations to break upon us out of the book of Scripture, the book of nature, the book of life. It is the attitude of hope and faith, looking forward to better things to come, and willing to make ventures into the realm of the unseen. This is the attitude of Abraham, of Moses, of Isaiah, of Paul, of our Lord himself. For these men pioneered the way into new countries and led the sons of men into the possession of new and larger eras. It is the attitude of the strong spirits who in every

age have subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, stopped the mouths of lions, waxed mighty in battle, and put to flight the armies of the aliens, men of faith and courage, of vision and achievement.

But some one will say: "What of the Scriptures; is not this attitude antagonistic to them?" The very question suggests a practical danger that every Christian teacher should seek to avoid. The danger is that we give the impression that the Bible is an ordinary book. This danger is especially great in the case of half-educated people, and alas! so many of us come under that classification. The uneducated man reads the Bible spiritually. It speaks directly to his heart and conscience. The educated man reads it appreciatively. It reaches his heart and conscience through the intellect. The half-educated man reads it in neither way and it would require little encouragement for him to miss its message altogether. I beg to emphasize the fact that the Bible is not an ordinary book. It was written for the most part by religious geniuses; men whose deepest thoughts and aspirations were religious; men moved by the Holy Ghost. And no library contains its equal.

Is this attitude antagonistic to the Scriptures? On the contrary, it exalts and follows them. For men who are seeking truth cannot, dare not, ignore the Scriptures; for it is they that make us wise unto salvation. To men of this attitude the Scriptures are the supreme revelation of God in literature and history. They are, on the one hand, the record of God's progressive self-revelation to man, and, on the other, the record of man's increasing spiritual apprehension under the guidance of the divine spirit. They are the record of the human experience of God. But they also reveal the origin and progress of a movement in history—a movement with a purpose and a goal. The Old Testament is the record of the movement that culminated in Christ. The New Testament is the record of the advent of a new movement, the accumulated spiritual potency of the ages coming into form and taking direction. This movement began at Bethlehem amid the angel chorus, and is yet pressing on toward the redemption of the world from darkness and sin. We believe in the Old Testament because it does not end in a hopeless morass, or at the brink of a bridgeless chasm, but leads through an open way into larger issues. We believe in the New Testament because it

unveils him who is the hope of the ages, and furnishes the ideal, the method, and the dynamic, for the realization of the perfect day.

But—and the question is inevitable—what of Jesus? You will notice that the argument of the epistle culminates in Jesus. Can a man who is honestly seeking the loftiest example, the purest life, the noblest self-giving, the most winsome perfection, the most fascinating gentleness blended with the most admirable strength, turn away from him whose career was a “perfect life in perfect labor writ?” Can he who is seeking the wisest teacher, the surest guide, the safest leader, the bravest captain, turn away from him who spoke as never man spoke, whose words were windows into truth, and whose life was truth incarnated? Can he who is seeking a vision of God that satisfies and completes, that fills the horizon of hope, and meets the demands of reason, that holds the promise of the future and is the life of the present, a God who is father and mother to the soul, who is love and light and spirit—can such a one reject the God whom Jesus brought into our mental horizon and into our spiritual experience? Can one afford to turn away from him who beckons us with hands pierced for us up the shiny heights of love and life and truth that lead to God? Nay, nay, for this age and for the next, and for ages to come, men shall still stand with rapt gaze and radiant faces with the author of this Hebrew epistle, “looking unto Jesus the captain and perfecter of our faith.”